



# Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) in Washington

Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee  
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**Scott Frank**, Director, Performance Audit

**Cheryl Thresher**, Schools Program Manager

**Lisa Weber**, Methodologist, Performance Audit

**Emily Cimber**, Performance Auditor

# Extensive audit plan followed two tracks

“Beginning in the 2013-14 school year and continuing through the 2016-17 school year, pay costs associated with a biennial measure of student outcomes and financial audit of the district's alternative learning experience courses by the office of the state auditor.”

# History of ALE audits

- 2011 ■ Accountability audits
- 2012 ■
- 2013 ■ ESSB 5946 signed into law
- 2014 ■ Accountability report for 2011-13
- 2015 ■ Preliminary performance audit report
- 2016 ■ First performance audit full report  
Accountability audit report for 2013-15
- 2017 ■
- 2018 ■ Accountability report for 2013-17  
Second performance audit full report



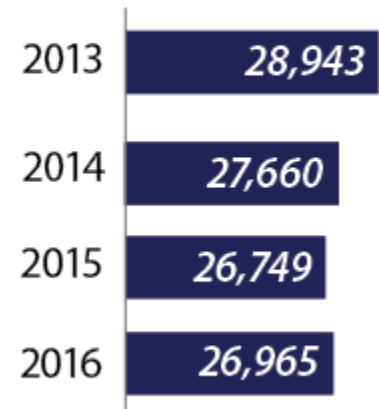
# Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) in WA



# Part 1: Financial audits examine compliance with state law

- Financial audits conducted over four years, 2013-2016
- Examined every ALE program with more than 10 Average Annual Full-Time Equivalent students
  - ▢ 99% of students reported for ALE funding
  - ▢ 433 programs over the four-year audit period
    - Some programs audited twice in that time, so this number is higher than the number of programs operating in any one year
- Primary data source for these audits: OSPI enrollment reports

ALE FTE enrollment  
student numbers  
*School fiscal years 2013–2016*



Total number of FTEs 110,317

# Six areas of concern that prompt questioned costs

Area of concern	What prompts questioned costs
1. Written Student Learning Plans (WSLP)	Missing one of four elements
2. Monthly evaluations of student progress	Not performing monthly progress review
3. Evidence of student contact with certificated instructor	Not retaining documentation
4. District release for non-resident students	Not retaining documentation
5. Signed parental Statements of Understanding	Not obtaining document on time
6. Requirements that ALE lead to a high school diploma	Not satisfying state laws requiring high school course of study lead to diploma



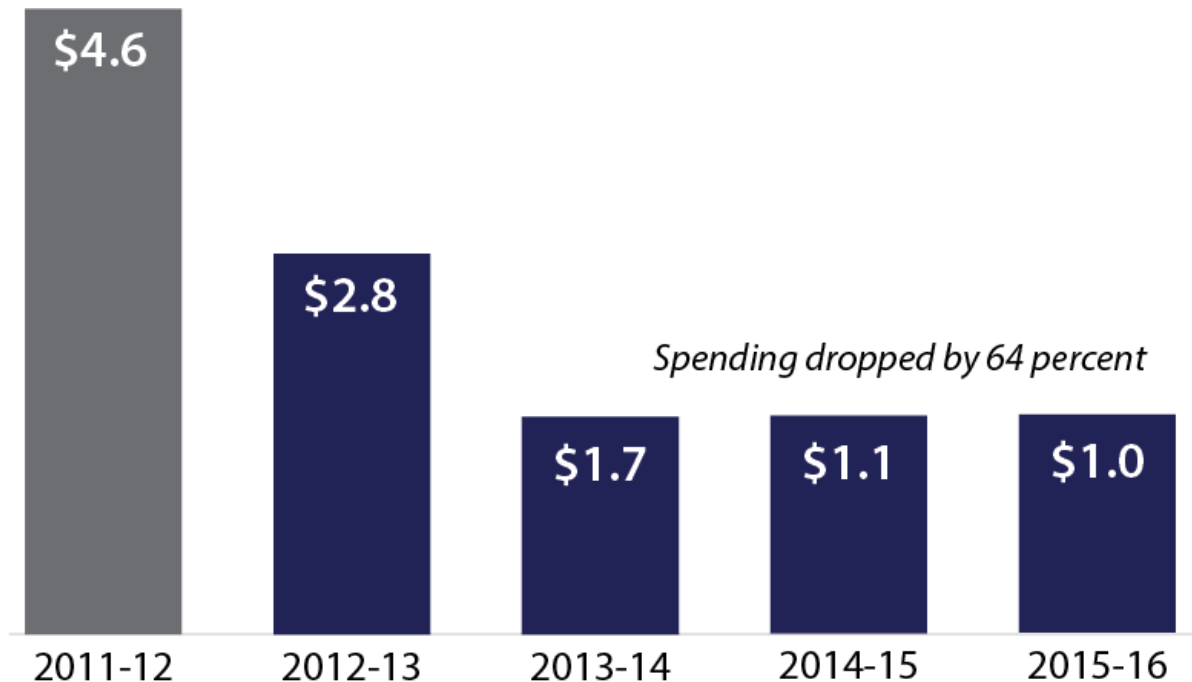
# Financial audits show improvement over time

Questioned costs have decreased significantly,  
overall district compliance with regulations improving

School fiscal years	Percent of ALE student enrollment audited	Programs audited	Districts audited	Questioned costs
2013	39%	49	20	\$866,877 in 13 districts
2014	60%	174	104	\$889,754 in 55 districts
2015	44%	85	54	\$642,768 in 34 districts
2016	56%	125	73	\$474,871 in 45 districts
Four year totals:		433	251	\$2,884,270 in 147 districts

# Legislators also asked about ‘Substantially Similar’ spending

Statute amended in 2012, required districts to report ‘substantially similar’ spending annually



Community-based instructors hired as non-certificated district employees are not reported on the Substantially Similar report



# Recommendations continue to address persistent issues

Two key recommendations address multiple problem areas

Problem areas	Recommendations
Written Student Learning Plans (WSLP) Monthly evaluations of student progress Certificated teacher contact Requirement that ALE lead to a high school diploma	Approve or re-approve all ALE programs in a process similar to that currently required of digital online programs. Programs should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Align with Washington state standards</li><li>• Report how satisfactory progress is measured</li><li>• Lead to high school diploma</li></ul>
WSLP; Monthly evaluations of student progress Certificated teacher contact; District releases	Require districts use standard templates developed by OSPI for written student learning plans, student monthly progress reviews and student-instructor contact

# Recommendations continue to address persistent issues

Two additional recommendations address specific issues

Problem areas	Recommendations
Funding tied to signed parental Statement of Understanding	Amend guidance to no longer tie parental signature on the letter of attestation to ALE funding
Requirement that ALE lead to a high school diploma	Develop uniform guidance that clearly defines ALE course types used for reporting, enabling districts to report accurately and consistently

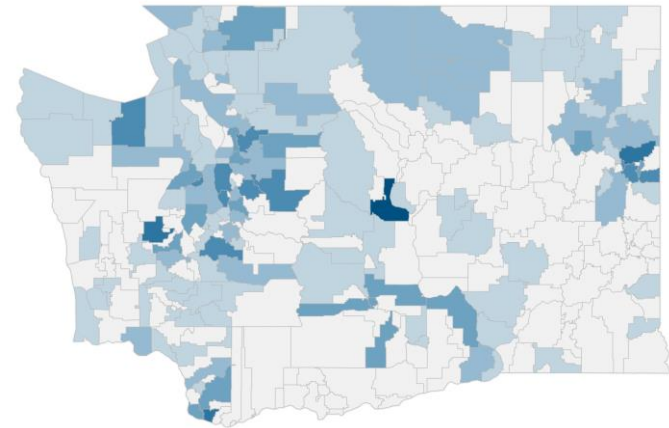
# Part 2: Who is responsible for accurate data?



## OSPI responsibilities

### RCW 28A.300.040

- Have supervision over all matters pertaining to the public schools of the state
- Report to the governor and the legislature such information and data as may be required for the management and improvement of the schools



## School district responsibilities

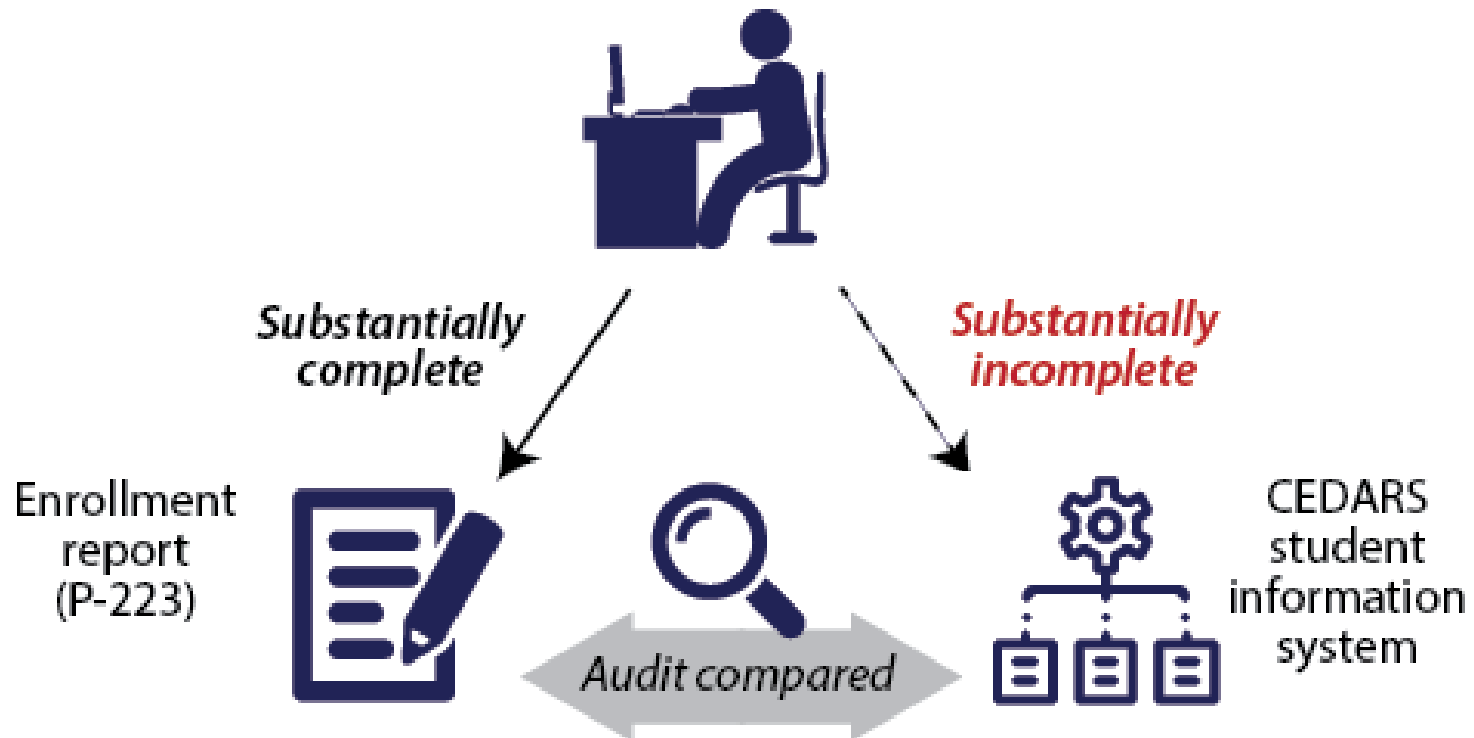
### RCW 28A.232.010

### WAC 392.121.182

- Designate ALE courses as such when reporting student coursework in Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS)

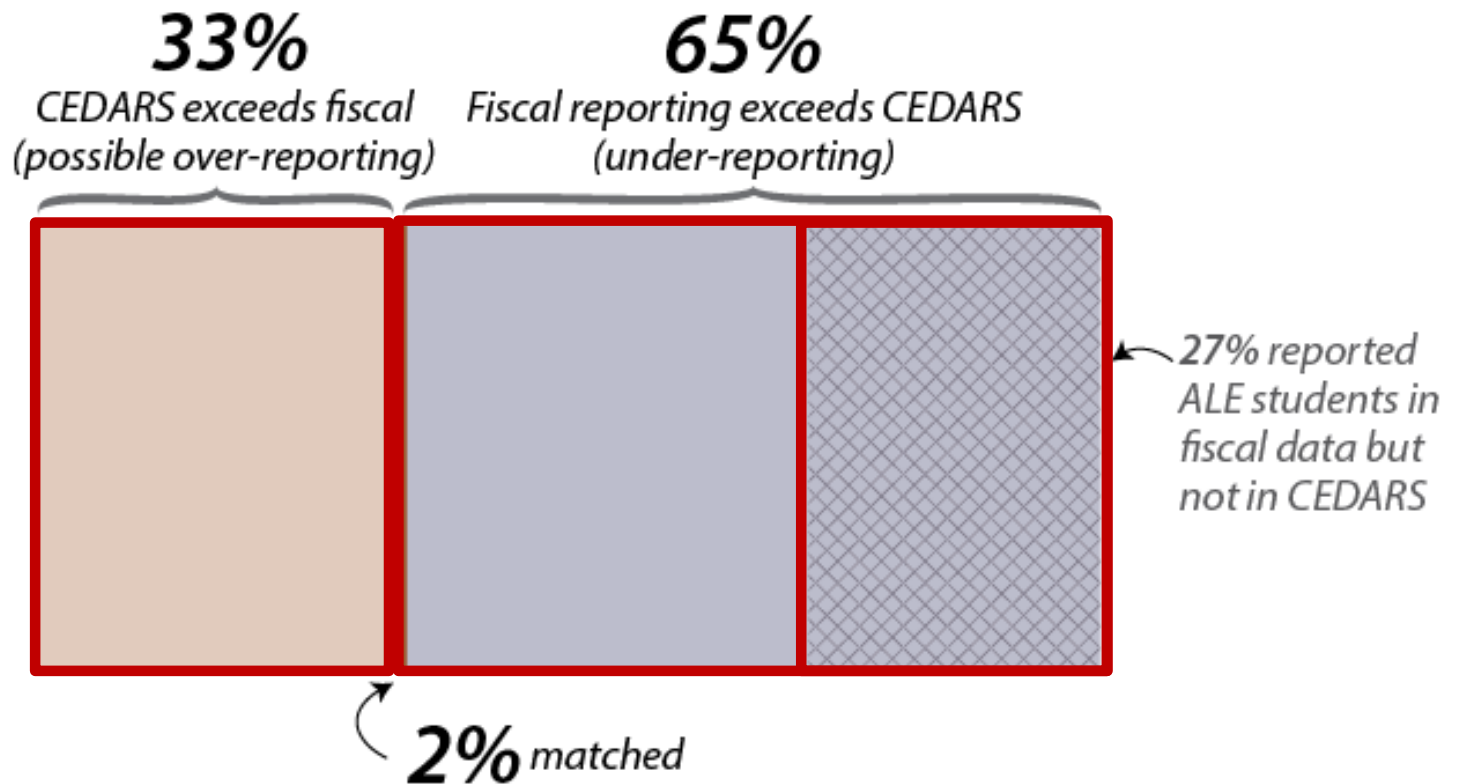
# Poor data quality exists in CEDARS

ALE student data does not align in two key reporting systems



# Data quality issue prevented measurement of outcomes

Inconsistencies between fiscal and CEDARS data for ALE student enrollment



# Causes for data quality issues

## **School districts use multiple data systems**

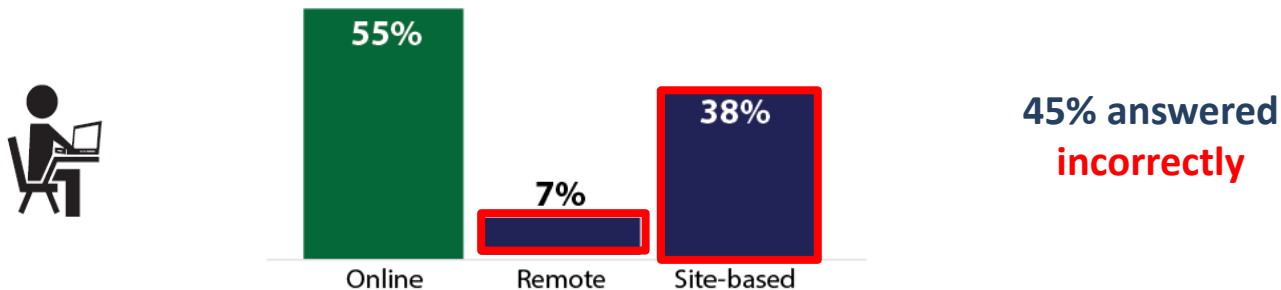
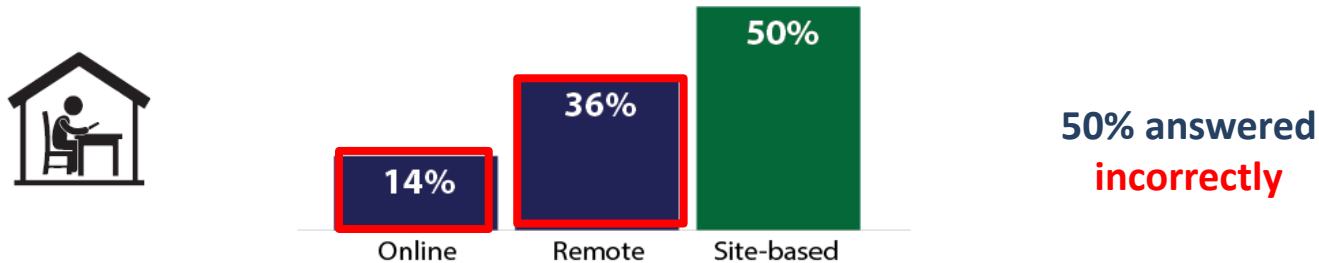
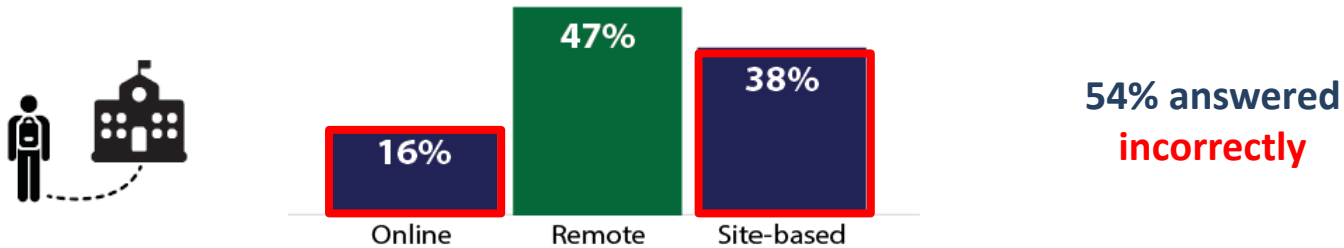
- Local systems that do not connect with CEDARS

## **Inconsistent understanding of reporting requirements**

- Guidance on department webpage was outdated
- OSPI did not maintain a contact list for individual ALE programs

# ALE programs interpret course type definitions differently

How would you report this student's ALE course type in CEDARS?





# Data needed to measure student outcomes

- **ALE students must be:**
  - ❑ Individually identifiable
  - ❑ Distinguishable from other students who did not receive ALE instruction
- **A student record must be:**
  - ❑ Matched to outcome data for the same student over time

Researchers, educators, policy makers and other members of the educational system rely on good data to make informed decisions.

# Recommendations

**To be able to measure outcomes of ALE instruction, we recommend the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI):**

1. Identify barriers hindering districts from accurately designating ALE courses when reporting a student's coursework in CEDARS
2. Engage school district leadership to increase compliance with ALE reporting in CEDARS as required by RCW and WAC

**In order to be able to measure long-term outcomes for all students, we recommend OSPI:**

3. Collaborate with The Education Research & Data Center (ERDC) to ensure OSPI data in the ERDC data warehouse is complete and accurate

# Part 3: Are ALE programs meeting their intended purpose?

“ ... to give schools flexibility to serve a diverse student population.”

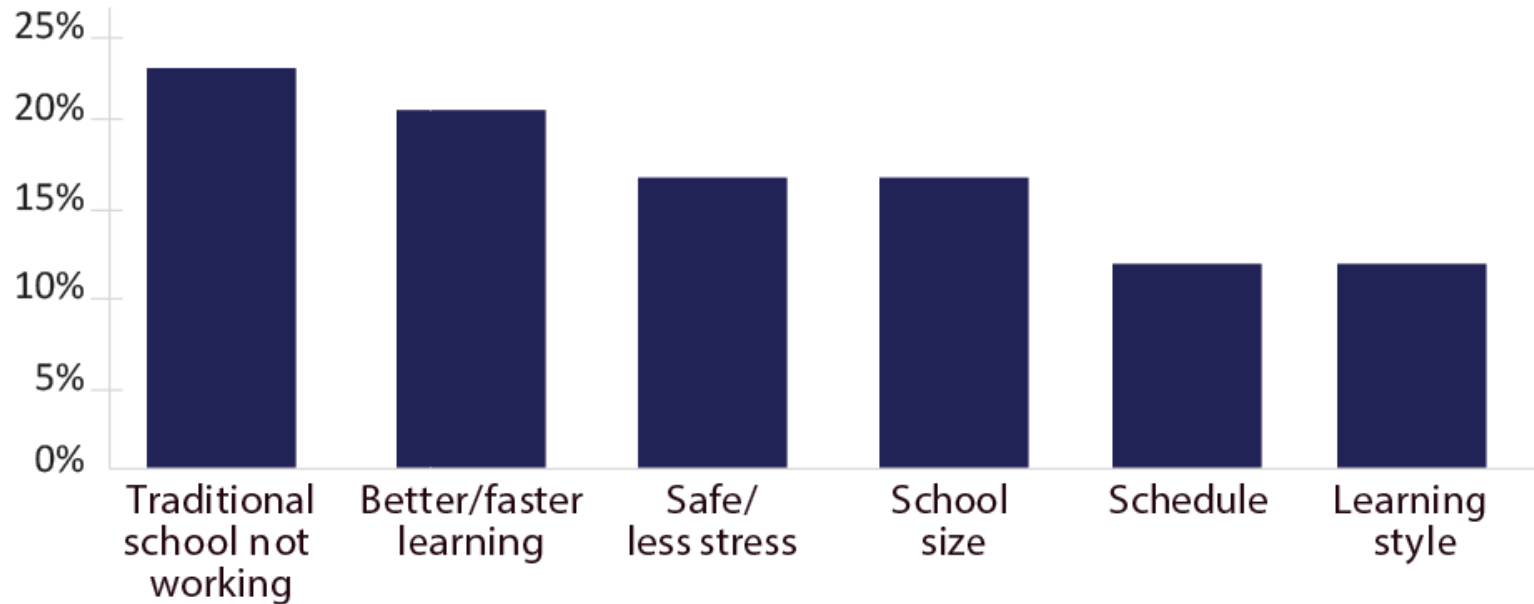


# Traditional education presents barriers for some students

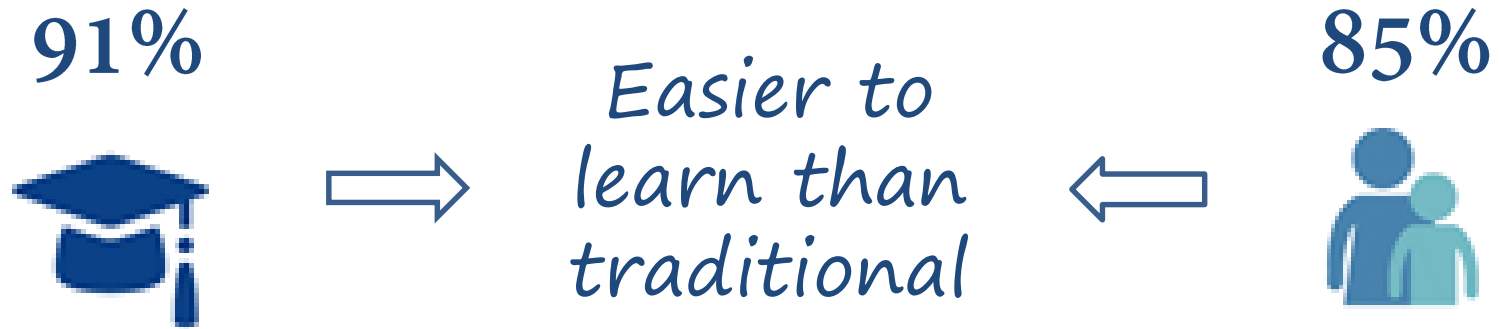
Challenges described include:

- Student cannot attend during typical school hours
- Overstimulation presented by the sights, sounds and crowds of a typical school environment
- Feeling disengaged from their education

# Survey reveals traditional education was not working



# Survey reveals traditional education was not working



“**Five days a week is too much** for someone who has to help support a family.

The class sizes are smaller; we each get more **individual one-on-one work**.”

# State's ALE programs serve a diverse population





# Alternative approaches to delivering instruction

Nova High School

Kent Phoenix Academy

Independent Learning Center

Three Rivers Homelink

Avanti High School

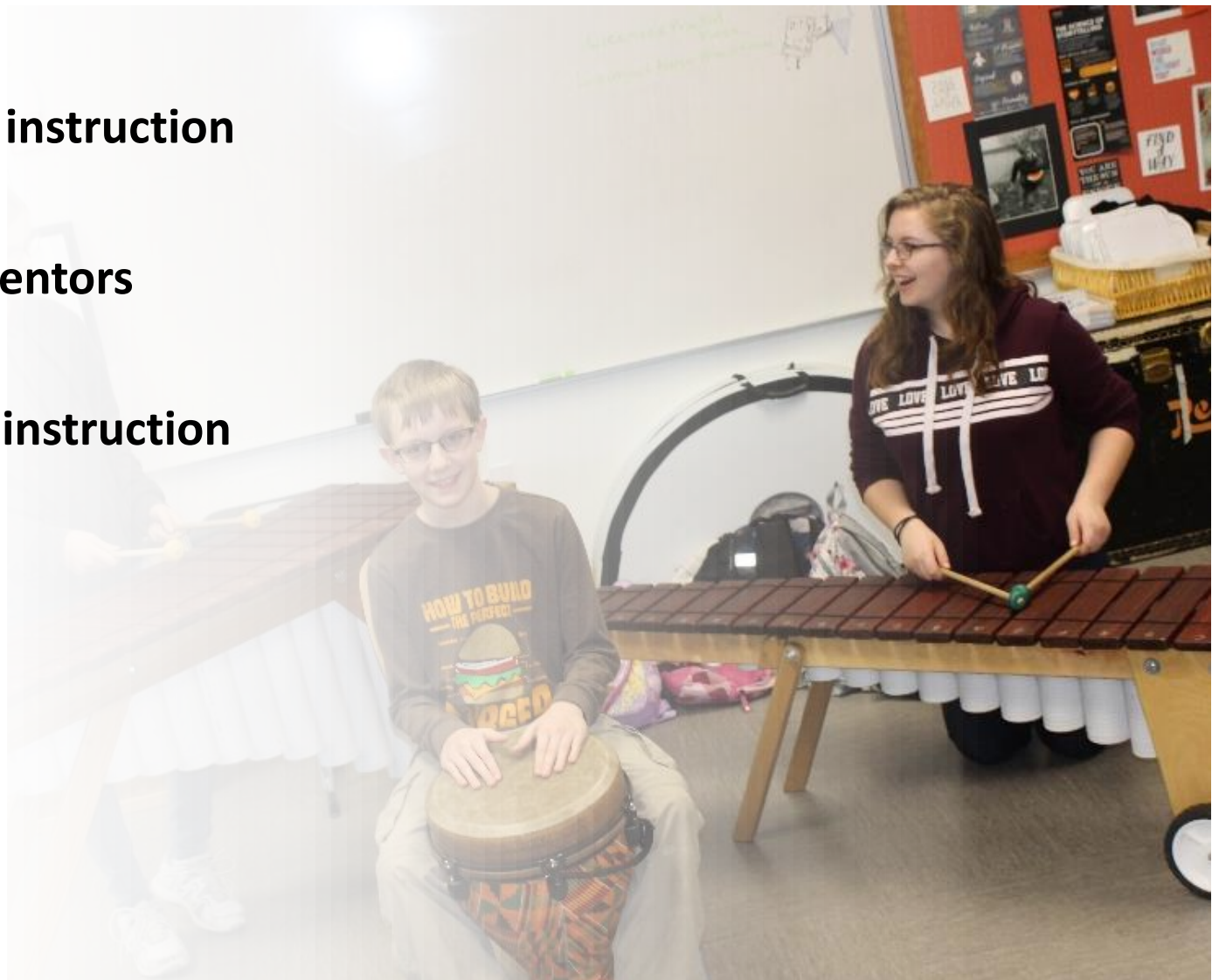
Discovery Alternative High School

Eastmont Opportunities

Sky Valley Education Center

# Alternative approaches to delivering instruction

- Individualized instruction
- Community mentors
- Project-based instruction



# Alternative approaches to student assessment

- Individual student growth
- Mastery or competency-based assessment
  - ▢ Must demonstrate minimum level of competency
  - ▢ Alleviates stress

“

You keep redoing the work until it's an A or B. Then you **understand what an A or B paper is**, and what's expected of you.

”

# Additional supports

- On-site social services
  - ❑ Therapy
  - ❑ Teen health clinic
  - ❑ Child-care
- Emotional support through small class sizes and strong student-teacher relationships



“Since it’s less stressful,  
I **feel less anxious** and  
I actually no longer  
have depression since I  
started going here.”

# Students report feeling more comfortable in ALE programs

“**Feel safer**”

I've never seen bullying here. You can dress the way you want, be intellectual **without being judged.**

Bonding with your teachers can help make the school a **safe place** and make it easier to learn.



# Students report feeling more comfortable in ALE programs

“**Freedom to  
work at my  
own pace**”

It is easier here  
because **I can work  
at my own pace**  
whether that be fast  
or kind of slow.

ALE is more friendly on the  
senses. I am able to work  
in a **more accommodating  
environment.**



# Students report feeling more comfortable in ALE programs

## “Increased level of engagement”

It is easy to lose interest in a school where you feel like just a grain of sand. At my alternative school, we **support and motivate each other**.

I have too much **respect for teachers** here ... I don't feel I need to rebel.





# Where would you be if ALE wasn't an option?

“It was either come here or **drop out**. I wanted to graduate and this was the only chance for me to do it.”

“I would be **homeless** and not have a plan to improve and make myself better.”

“We would be **dead**.”

“If this school wasn't here, I **wouldn't be graduating**”

“When I got here, the world started to **make sense**.”

# Drawing conclusions around ALE

Financial audits made recommendations addressing six persistent areas of concern in ALE reporting.

- School districts are already improving compliance
- Additional changes may help them improve further

# Drawing conclusions around ALE

The 2013 mandate asked for a “measure of student outcomes”

- Originally planned to conduct a comparative, quantitative data analysis
  - Lack of complete and reliable data made this impossible
- As an alternative, used rigorous qualitative methods to evaluate ALE programs
  - Staff and participants reported programs were flexible, innovative, and provided critical services
- The work on the mandate is complete
  - May revisit ALE when better data are available

# Contacts

**Pat McCarthy**

State Auditor

(360) 902-0360

[Pat.McCarthy@sao.wa.gov](mailto:Pat.McCarthy@sao.wa.gov)

**Scott Frank**

Director of Performance Audit

(360) 902-0376

[Scott.Frank@sao.wa.gov](mailto:Scott.Frank@sao.wa.gov)

**Cheryl Thresher**

Schools Program Manager

(360) 725-5608

[Cheryl.Thresher@sao.wa.gov](mailto:Cheryl.Thresher@sao.wa.gov)

**Lisa Weber**

Methodologist

(360) 725-5419

[Lisa.Weber@sao.wa.gov](mailto:Lisa.Weber@sao.wa.gov)

**Emily Cimber**

Performance Auditor

(360) 725-5430

[Emily.Cimber@sao.wa.gov](mailto:Emily.Cimber@sao.wa.gov)

Explore ALE survey data on our website at: [www.sao.wa.gov/local/Pages/ALEStudy\\_FinalResults](http://www.sao.wa.gov/local/Pages/ALEStudy_FinalResults)